

Metamorphoses

(a project on the multiple identities that inhabit us)

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Abstract. *Metamorphoses* is a project about identity, based in traditional animation techniques. It was created using as starting point two drawings made by the 5th grade students at the C.E.I.P. Jorge Guillén in Mostoles: a self-portrait and a mixture of animals they would like to morph into in order to acquire their abilities, capacities, qualities...From here, we imagined the animal-outcome in a round-trip process, along with a text based on their words that refer to our lost morphing-abilities.

Keywords: Metamorphoses, becoming animal, drawing, traditional animation.

1 Introduction

This article develops the main concept, the motivations, the planning, stages of development, conclusion and reflections on the animated film *Metamorphoses* (a project on the multiple identities that dwell within us). It's a traditional animation film whose central theme is the metamorphoses, understood as multiple ongoing creation and re-creation between the 'I's inhabiting inside us. In this project, those 'I's are understood as process and becoming, as we assume our capacity to hold other voices beyond the one that is the main source of our identity when faced with each other. The animation is structured around the questions posed to a group of children between the ages of 10 and 11 from the *Jorge Guillén* state school in Mostoles, Madrid, Spain. It was created within the context of the seminar "*To be or not to be a body*", directed by *Amalia Fernández* and the philosopher *Santiago Alba Rico*, that took place in the *National Museum Center of Art Reina Sofía*, in Madrid, organized by the Advanced Studies Program in Critical Practices. The animation, developed over three months, was presented at the National Museum along with the results of the seminar.

2 Main concepts

As this project was created in the context of a seminar based on philosophical approaches following the ideas of *Santiago Alba Rico*, along with contemporary dance theory and practice, it could be inscribed within the critical studies background. The starting point of this project is the certainty that our identity is constituted by “different voices” silenced by cultural, economic and educational reasons. In a social context such as ours, almost entirely devoted to productivity and to obtaining each individual’s maximum performance (almost exclusively understood in economic terms), the worldwide spread request for specialization seems logical. This request requires us to develop a unique own “voice” an unmistakable identity that can be easily recognizable by everybody, that facilitates our unambiguous identification. Implicit in this, is the requirement of a linear lifelong trajectory which tends to neglect or underestimate what is around us: the multiple, the hidden corners, everything that falls outside the realm of what has practical purposes. This paradigm we are immersed in, inhibits or prohibits the “multiple identities” that inhabits each of us, hampers its development and prevents us from be trained in in the difference. Contemporary women and men must have the strength to remain equal to themselves, always debating between the non-commotion and the commotion, or at least, between the commotion-control in which we, as adults, have been educated, always identical to ourselves, and a strong inner voice that let oneself resonate, or at least let oneself echo the experiential, artistic and cultural manifestations. In our opinion, this is the denial of the *metamorphoses*, traditionally considered a human capacity par excellence.

This has not always been the case. In the book *The Metamorphosis*, *Ovidi* considers the exchanges between different types of nature possible and plausible transformations of humans and gods in plants, in animals or constellations, stones and rocks.

Also *Elías Canetti*¹ speaks about the capacity, formerly universal but today in disuse, of morphing. Traditionally represented as signs in the body itself, the range of the metamorphoses oscillated, according to *Canetti*, between well differentiated sensations in the body itself to changes of form, function, state and character of the being. Metamorphoses were expressions of desires, of the sublime that dwells in us, of censorship or external prohibitions emerged in the unconscious, that come to life in the creative imagination taking shape in our bodies, leading us to accept as real metaphors and Symbols.

We must clarify that we understand the concept of metamorphoses in terms of process and becoming, following the concept developed by *Deleuze and Guattari*:

“Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding

¹ Canetti, E. pp.353-358.

*relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, "appearing," "being," "equalling," or "producing."*²

That is to say, that our metamorphoses is not a process of imitation or identification, but it is the becoming itself what is real, the end itself. For our project, we have focused on the *becoming-animal*, which is one of the infinite *becomings* that Deleuze and Guattari identify:

"Becoming-animal is only one becoming among others. A kind of order or apparent progression can be established for the segments of becoming in which we find ourselves; becoming-woman, becoming-child, becoming-animal, -vegetable, or -mineral; becomings-molecular of all kinds, becomings-particles."

And later they add: *Singing or composing, painting, writing have no other aim: to unleash these becomings.*³

Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal, is developed through unending affections, mutations and relationships and, in a sense, reveal and exploit the inherent contradictions of the rational animal that is man.

Also for Jung, in the development of the theory of the Archetype as collective unconscious the animal has a fundamental role in the creation and development of myths, symbols and human dreams. However, as Rosi Braidotti affirms, we believe that there is a fundamental difference between the two approaches of the man-animal relationship:

*... the realization of the archetypes sets the ego within a framework of references and attributes, since it does not operate the qualitative reformulation of the perception and the immanence that nomadic thought requires.*⁴

Nomadic thought is the Deleuze's approximation to the concept of becoming-animal as an expansion of the self in a multiplicity of imprecise and changing boundaries, with experiences in which the human body is felt as the host of processes that it cannot control. It is about the expansion of life, understood as biological sequences -Zoe-towards the Bios- understood as the self-reflective control of life, unique to the human being.

For Sigmund Freud, the unconscious is populated by animals, "a whole multiplicity of animal forces of which the human body consisted", but we also deviate from the thought of psychoanalysis, for which every animal that appears represents a repressed aspect that is susceptible to become pathology, therefore, there is an instrumentalization and "domestication" that Braidotti points out: *"The Animal drives must be processed and domesticated for the sake of becoming tolerable. Your wild anxiety needs to be bent."*⁵

It is also not related to the analysis that makes Tzvetan Todorov of the literary genre fantastic and of the appearance in him of the metamorphoses understood in binary terms, i.e., relating the real in opposition to the unreal, the sanity in opposition to the madness, and thus associating this with metamorphic transformations.

² Deleuze, Guattari. p.245.

³ Deleuze, Guattari, p.274.

⁴ Braidotti, R. p. 162.

⁵ Ibidem, 175.

The becoming animal represented, opens the door to unknown forces, possibly violent, uncontrollable and uncontrolled, oblivious to prudence.

This capacity, formerly universal, whose maintenance *Elías Canetti* and *Deleuze* and *Guattari* considered one of the duties of the writers – and we add, of artists in general – could be part, in varying degrees, of each and every one of us and start from childhood. It would allow us to "create more and more space in ourselves," rather than limiting that space by seeking socially-raised objectives. A space inhabited by human beings and living in general to which we give place and in which we can metamorphose, beyond immediate personal interests, simply by an inexplicable desire that can never end to be satisfied. It is not a question of collecting what we find, but of absorbing and letting ourselves be carried away by the routes or "deviations", that is to say:

*"It is in this sense that becoming-everybody/everything, making the world a becoming, is to world, to make a world or worlds, in other words, to find one's proximities and zones of indiscernibility"*⁶

Such apparent chaos requires a constant struggle not to succumb to him, and that we get used to work and understand the teachings of myths and their emergence, in everyday life, at every moment,

As the theorist of new media *Jussi Parikka* says, *"Animality is then a "vector of becoming". And "Biology became one new crucial "image of thought" that acted as the plane on which several other cultural such as metamorphoses and mimicry, entomologically inspired accounts of life and culture also explained new ways of understanding intensities."*⁷

3- Development

Following *Jean Piaget*⁸ in his research, the child believes that his thoughts are common to all: a feeling of communion fills his vision of the world, and Nature is full of favourable or disturbing beings. Animals give rise to relationships of the same order, and the child has the impression of being understood by them. The boy and the girl mix certain animals in their moral life, conferring them certain feelings that he has experienced with his parents, friends and surroundings. Sometimes, those feelings are also transferred to the things themselves: this is what Piaget calls Animism⁹. For this reason, we have focused this project on working with children instead of adults. Talking to them we discover that for them, becoming an animal is not imitating their gestures or main characteristics. It is the very becoming that is real, identifying

" an objective zone of indetermination or uncertainty, "something shared or indiscernible," a proximity "that makes it impossible to say where the boundary between the human and animal lies," not only in the case of autistic children, but

⁶ Deleuze & Guattari, p. 281.

⁷ Parikka, J. p. 88

⁸ Piaget, J. pp.153-179.

⁹ Ibidem. pp.153-179.

*for all children; it is as though, independent of the evolution carrying them toward adulthood, there were room in the child for other becomings, "other contemporaneous possibilities" that are not regressions but creative involutions bearing witness to "an inhumanity immediately experienced in the body as such," unnatural nuptials "outside the programmed body."*¹⁰

So, based on these considerations, we have decided to use animation to represent these becomings graphically: the *becoming-animal* of 22 girls and boys between 10 and 11 years of age belonging to the C.I.P. Jorge Guilén in Móstoles.

3.1 Why animation?

The notion of transformation or metamorphoses as a shape-shifting process appears in many ancient tales, and the language of animation explores this aspect.

One of the starting points of this project is the certainty of the expansion of the universe of animation.¹¹ Several books of animation as a "pervasive tool" that allows "...other creative modes of perception and mental activity, such as pre-and non verbal thought, inner speech, dreams and the ability to engage with non-indexical mimetic and abstract art forms..."¹² have been written in recent years. Within the context of the seminar mentioned before, devoted to discussion, debate and practical research (activities and performances) around how we construct our identity, we decided to explore the animal imaginary of children and their relationship with the animal world, using traditional animation. We consider that animation is a good tool to facilitate or to imagine cross-species coupling: it could be seen as "*an approach that inevitably facilitates a representational difference and that intrinsically interrogates orthodox positions, embedded ideology and epistemological certainty per se. Knowledge of and about apparently specific creatures or objects or even human figures is challenged and potentially redefined.*"¹³ And also, depicting process of formation could be very transgressive. Animation usually depicts this formlessness, and using animal metamorphoses facilitates transitions and visualize changes through symbolic resources and effects. As Jussy Parikka says, "*It is less a matter of representation than of establishing relations on a plane of immanence.*"¹⁴

And what kind of relations? "*It privileges cross-species engagement, cross-dressing, gender-shifting, and the performance of identity as a method by which*

¹⁰ Deleuze, Guattari, p.276.

¹¹ Cholodenko, Alan "The expanding Universe of Animation (studies)". In Animation Studies Online Journal, Vol. 11. Ed. Society for Animation Studies. <https://journal.animationstudies.org/category/volume-11/alan-cholodenko-the-expanding-universe-of-animation-studies/>

¹² Buchan, Suzanne "Introduction: Pervasive Animation", in "pervasive Animation. Ed. Suzanne Buchan. AFI Film Readers. Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group. 2013. New York.

¹³ Wells, Paul. The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture (Kindle Locations 119-122). Rutgers University Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁴ Parikka, Jussi "Insect Media. An archaeology of Animals and Technology. Posthumanities11. University of Minnesota Press. Minneapolis. 2010. p.95.

*unreal settings and impossible situations may be used as a vehicle to play with contemporary issues.”*¹⁵

That’s why Metamorphoses could be seen as “*natural-cultural*” project: a term coined by *Donna Haraway* to explain an intellectual and creative environment in which animals are represented, or the places of conflation of nature and culture,

But also becoming an animal could be seen by children as one of the four categories of games: as described in *Jesper Juul’s* dictionary of video game theory, following *Parikka*:

*“In this last one category, mimicry, (make-believe), the relation between animals and humans is expressed on a continuum: it could be seen as an engine of metamorphoses that transfigure spaces and players (or participants) with a continuum of changes, separations, movements, associations and dissociations”*¹⁶.

3.2 The process

For three days, we spoke individually with each of the boys and girls who attended 5th grade in the aforementioned school. The procedure consisted of three stages: interviews, drawings/animation and sound.

a.-Interviews: The testimonies of girls and boys. 20 cards of black and white animal drawings, where presented to children. We chose black and white drawings instead of colour photographs, to deviate from a realistic representation of the animals located in their usual environment. We used more abstract representations, collected from different sources, to invite them to carry out their own representations.

From these images, which they observe for minutes, these questions are asked:

a1.- *“Have you ever felt as if you were transformed into any of these animals or things that are depicted in these drawings, or perhaps into others? Tell us what, when and how.”*

Some examples were added to clarify the character or orientation of the question, such as: *“For example, when you are at the top of a mountain and you feel like a bird, as if you were going to fly, or When you ride a bike, and the wind blows in your face, as if you were a butterfly or a bird, or when you get angry, you feel that you can become a lion, or to be a lion when you want to protect your little brother so that nothing bad happens to him or to prevent him to be afraid... or as a Ostrich that hides the head beneath the earth if you are afraid, or like a rock when you insist on doing something and your parents tell you that you should not...”*.

a2.- *“Would you like sometimes to be able to transform yourself into some of these animals to adopt their qualities, or to be like them?”*

a3.- *What animal or animals do you admire? Why?*

¹⁵ Wells, Paul. *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (Kindle Locations 1124-1125). Rutgers University Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁶ Following Parikka: “Caillois (1961) posits four categories of games: Agon (contest), alea(chance), ilinx (vertigo), and mimicry (make-believe).” p. 105.

a4.-Would you like to become a mix of them all, being different from the one you are now? What animals or things would you mix and why?

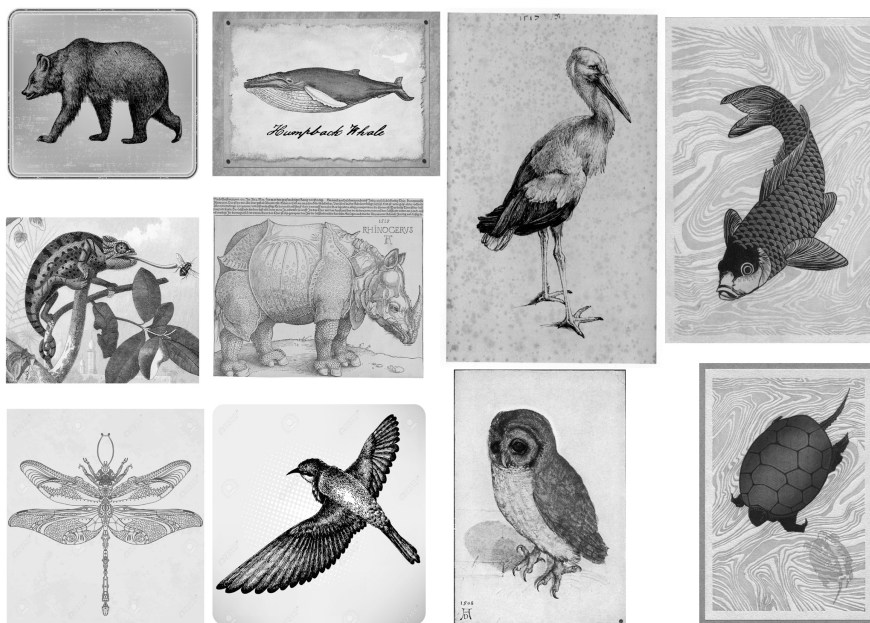


Fig. 1. Some of the drawings of the animals presented to the children.

Children think that animals have amazing abilities to perceive or to achieve things that humans can't. So, they think that they engage with the world on different terms and conditions than us, so they want to experience this. We could say, as John Berger said that *"The animal represents the apogee of the character trait in question: the lion, absolute courage; the hare, lechery. The animal once lived near the origin of the quality. It was through the animal that the quality first became recognizable. And so the animal lends it his name. (Berger 1980, 16)"*¹⁷

The animals that girls and boys talk about are at the same time individuated, that is, their personal animals with which they share space and daily time, like "My Cat", "My Dog", "My Turtle", "My Hamster"..., -that is to say, those that Deleuze and Guattari identify as the preferred by psychoanalysis to discover in them the figure of the father or mother¹⁸, But from there, he or she jumps to those animals that are included in the myths, archetypes or models: the lion, the serpent..., and to a third category: The herded animals or considered more demonic, usual protagonists of the tales (the wolf)...- And each animal can, during

¹⁷ Wells, Paul. *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (Kindle Locations 163-165). Rutgers University Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁸ Deleuze & Guattari, p.247.

the conversation, traverse the three states, or start with family animals, of which "adopt" their characteristics, to become mythological and adopt the characteristics that are socially presupposed, and then mix it with the herd animals.¹⁹

b.- Drawings: Once these questions are made, they are invited to make three drawings: a self-portrait-that is, the representation of how they see themselves-, the drawing of their favourite animal and the mixture result of all these animals – they used to call it a mythological beast. There were no technical limitation, but we recommended the content to be included in a DIN A4 size

This very last drawing depicts a tension between animalization and anthropomorphism: what *Paul Wells* calls "bestial ambivalence": "a conceptual tool that can be used in relation to specific animal characters or in relation to animal narratives in general"²⁰

3.3 Visual appearance and animation

In order to unify the graphic material that we were going to use, we opted to trace the drawings in black line. In so doing, the graphic treatment of the drawings, that is to say, the simple line of various thickness is the unifying element and that allows us to move from one character to another. The animation between the two main drawings, that is, between the self-portraits and the becoming-animals-mixture, seems to be the most appropriate way of representing these processes: process-character and resulting character, both gathered in the same concept.

From a technical point of view, transitions from metamorphoses, that is, interpolations, drawn frame by frame, include a variable number of steps, ranging from eleven to twenty, depending on the graphic complexity between the first drawing and the last one.

The sort of interpolations – "abrupt", sudden, humorous, calmer or quieter-is suggested by the character and personality revealed by each child to us during the conversations, so that the contact with each one of them is a tool that provides us with fundamental material for later graphic work. Finally, it was decided to perform the metamorphoses processes as a round-trip loop, so that it always starts with the "concrete personality" of each boy or girl and arrives back to his "human form". The animation goes from a sort of human images to the theriomorphic images²¹ to therianthropic, that is, combining the form of a beast with that of a man²², The mask used to hide part of the screen refers to the spotlights used in performing arts to isolate the main character and to focus the

¹⁹ We are based on the classification made by Deleuze and Guattari themselves (Deleuze, Guattari, 1988:246-47).

²⁰ Wells, Paul. *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (Kindle Locations 886-887). Rutgers University Press. Kindle Edition.

²¹ Something is presented as having the form of a beast

²² Wells, Paul. *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture* (Kindle Locations 1208-1211). Rutgers University Press. Kindle Edition.

attention of the viewer: Each child is the protagonist at any given time, and the focus "seeks" each new protagonist who unfolds in front of us its becoming-animal. metamorphoses: he will be able to better understand it and talk about it.

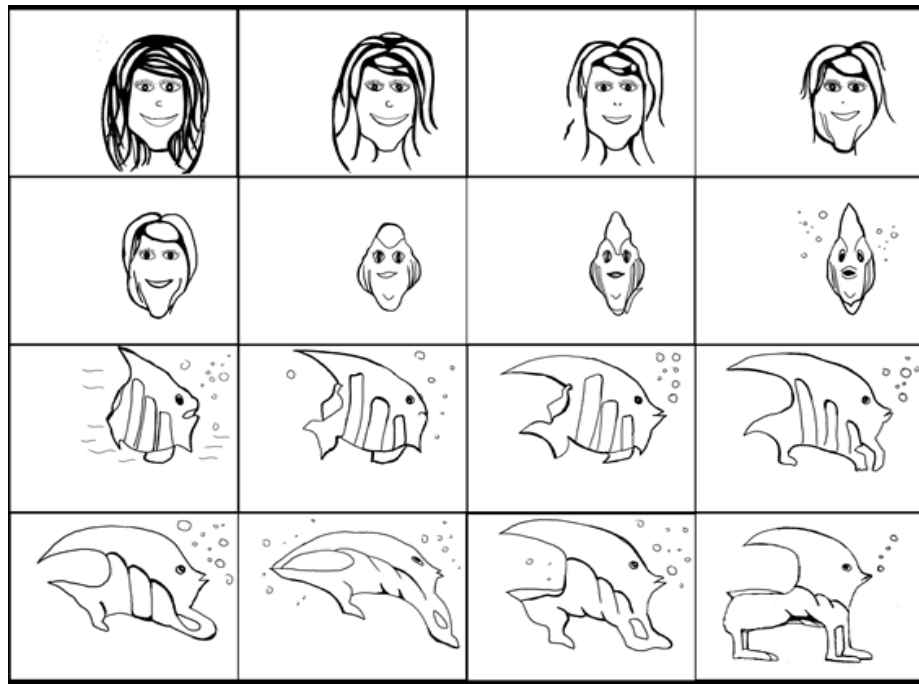


Fig. 2. The metamorphoses of one "becoming-animal" process.

3.4 Sound

Taking into account the answers given by the children, the animals that they chose and the attributes that confer or attributed them, we made the text. We want to emphasize that we made the decision to conjugate it in first person, and feminine, referring to the capacity of transformation and possibility of becoming of each person: as if in the narrator coexists all those animals and therefore, all these personalities and the transformation will be produced daily and accepted naturally. A reference to this first person-speech, with the narrator acting as a medium for which all events happen, is the work of *Daniela Comani* "it was me. Diary 1900-1999"²³, who represented Italy at the 54^a Venice Biennale of 2011. This project deals with 100 years of history presented with a first-person voice and in chronological order, as if all the events had happened to her, which goes from being a passive witness to an activist, to be later victim, executioner and perpetrator, the winner of the Nobel prize or an explorer. In fact, it can be read as a reference to the category of "the human" and the broad spectrum of acts that

²³ It could be seen here http://www.danielacomani.net/a.itwasme_ve.html

humanity is capable of: from the worst and most abject to the highest and altruistic actions. In addition to the mentioned text, sound recordings were made at the Zoo of Madrid, before the opening hours to the public. The Zoo was chosen because, in most cases, it is the place of reference that boys and girls have to contact with other animals besides their pets. We would like to thank the public-relations officers of the Zoo for their kindness and specifically to Maria Jose Luis Cerezo, in charge of communication of both the zoo Acuarium and Faunia of Madrid.

Here we can see a reduced version of the project.²⁴

3- Conclusions

The language of animation, in this case traditional animation created with simple media-black line on white background- has allowed us to deal with a complex concept such as the identity and the acceptance of certain degree of diversity in ourselves to configure our identity. In our project, the becoming-animal has been taken as a reference to explain the desires of the children when shaping their own personality, capacities and abilities. This kind of work can help them think about the capacity we all have to model and configure our own way of being in the world, fleeing from simplification, which necessarily standardize and impoverishes.

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